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Vance's "Disagreement in Principle"

Former secretary of state Cyrus Vance apparently came to the reluctant conclusion that the American hostages in Tehran would never be released so long as Jimmy Carter is in the White House.

Although Vance is too much of a gentleman to spell out his "disagreement in principle" with Carter, I have obtained a secret intelligence analysis prepared by Vance's subordinates that details his reasons for opposing not only the ill-fated rescue attempt, but also virtually every step Carter has taken since the hostages were seized last November.

The timing of Vance's resignation—submitted before the rescue attempt but announced after its failure—has lent a sour-grapes taint to his departure from the Carter Cabinet. But his views were known to the president a week before the rescue fiasco, and were unanimously supported by the U.S. diplomatic community.

Reflecting Vance's position, the secret intelligence document states that "the focus of American policy should be to restore rationality to Iran."

The analysis noted that Iranians are genuinely suspicious that the United States intends to restore the ousted shah to power. It also warned that economic sanctions and other U.S. actions that cause hardship to the Iranian people will undoubtedly "strengthen the determination to hold the hostages indefinitely and increase the prestige of religious radicals, whose strength is martyrdom."

While Vance meticulously observed the diplomatic niceties in his letter of resignation—and the president did likewise in his letter of acceptance, signed "Your friend"—the secret document shows that Vance's private opinion struck tellingly at the White House handling of the Iranian crisis.

Vance believed that it was Carter and his political advisers, with their Rose Garden strategy, who gave Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini the idea that he had something of inestimable value in a hard-line stance on the hostage during an election campaign.

By inflating the hostage crisis to the paramount issue in American policy—and in his reelection campaign—Carter has succeeded in lionizing Khomeini as the conqueror of the "American devil," Vance feels. Further pressure from the United States will serve only to unite Iran even more behind Khomeini, Vance was convinced.

Pressure from the United States, the secret document pointed out, relieves Khomeini of the impossible task of dealing with Iran's internal problems. Without the convenient U.S. scapegoat, the ayatollah would eventually be forced to release the hostages under pressure from other Moslem nations, Vance suggested.

Far from being "soft" on Iran, Vance saw Carter's supposedly hard line as a policy that would be self-defeating in its attempts to resolve the hostage crisis. So he quit.